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ABSTRACT

The competency movement, or "the cult of competency," is critiqued in this paper, which argues that the movement is less concerned with the complex facets of competence than it is with a technology of specific knowledge and application. Educational institutions have several message systems through which objectives can be achieved: pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and social discipline. The culture of competency is a current mechanism through which certain changes in the education professions are being advocated. However, the culture of competency is not an educational or professional movement, but a managerial movement resulting from industrial and economic panic. The goals are not broad educational goals that incorporate the diversity of social institutions such as the professions, but the systemization and subordination of those agencies. Three major objectives of the competency movement include the convergence of general and vocational education, a focus on performance rather than knowledge, and the enhancement of efficiency and productivity through the elimination of waste. The movement's likely effects on the four message systems include a redefinition of students and professionals as workers; a standardized, nonnegotiable curriculum; assessment based on measurable, technical outcomes; and the extension of surveillance mechanisms linked to economic models. Constraining the open-ended nature of professional activity may well produce the very opposite of what is wanted--not true competence, but a competency-based system in which professionals operate at the basic skill level. (LMI)

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Barely competent: against the deskilling of the professions via the cult of competence

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It was George Orwell who taught us to identify Newspeak - those forms of language which disguise their inhumane purposes beneath a veneer of acceptability. The language of the cult of competency is such a language, one which disguises two steps back under the pretence of one step forward.

The step forward is the promise of increased competence among professionals. Who could possibly be opposed to such an objective? I am strongly in favour of it myself. The ability to operate effectively with skill and judgment in an increasingly turbulent and problematic environment where the range of choices and options increases daily and where the balance of interest between individual, social, economic and environmental concerns becomes increasingly difficult to achieve is indeed something to be both admired and sought for. However, despite its rhetoric, the competency movement is less concerned with such complex, problematic issues than it is with a technology of specific knowledge and application. The slide from the complexity of competence towards the simple mindedness of competencies may in fact turn out to reduce rather than enhance the development of professional competence.

<u>On the Competence of Professionals</u>

Taking educators as a particular example of professionals, what might we look for as evidence of competence? For my part I would expect them to

a) be knowledgeable about the universe of knowledge to which they were introducing me, that is, the way the field of knowledge is structured and the arguments through which it progresses;

b) be able to share their excitement about their particular field in ways that challenge my imagination;

c) be able to help me to see how to go beyond the information given into some form of action within a productive social context.

Educational institutions, whether directed towards the education of professionals or anyone else have several message systems through which such objectives can be achieved. These are:

> *Pedagogy*: Which is not simply methodological (as Laurie Carmichael suggested yesterday) but is in fact about a form of social relationship that produces a particular kind of person. Pedagogy is not simply about techniques of instruction but also about the encouragement of certain forms of behaviour and commitment, about socialisation or, if you like, about the production of character and virtue as well as skills and knowledge.
>
> *Curriculum*. Which is not simply about the selection, organisation and transmission of knowledge but also about its social construction and its relationship to the processes of social production and reproduction within increasingly diverse societies.
>
> *Assessment*. Which is the system that not only evaluates and classifies individual performances but also the process by which the institution itself (school, university etc) and its relationship to the wider society is made transparent.
>
> *Social Discipline*. Which is the system of rewards and punishments imposed on individuals and institutions through such mechanisms as resource distribution, certification and accreditation, access, membership and employment.

Now it is a commonplace observation that changes in the context of educational agencies influence the internal organisation of these message systems (Bernstein 1975).

The cult of competency is one current mechanism through which certain changes are being advocated in the professions and their associated education programs. But it is important to recognise that the cult of competency in its current form (as in previous incarnations) is not an educational or professional movement, but a *managerial* movement resulting from industrial and economic panic. This much was also clear from Carmichael's paper. And it is also worth noting that the declared purpose is increased efficiency and increased articulation between differing sectors of society: economy, industry, education and the professions. That is, it is a process of micro-economic reform directed towards the increased

rationalisation of society[1]. If you like, it is a fairly typical reaction to conditions of uncertainty and insecurity- the drive to increase order and control in an increasingly uncertain world.[2] The goals are not broad educational goals which incorporate and support the diversity and creativity of social institutions such as the professions, but the systemisation and subordination of those agencies to an increasingly 'integrated' but chaotic economic system.

The techniques through which such order is sought are the classical techniques of conventional management theory: standardisation, hierachisation, globalisation and incorporation.

In the current situation three major objectives are sought upon the basis of such rhetoric:

a) The convergence of General Education and Vocational Education.

b) A focus on Performance rather than Knowledge.

c) The enhancement of Efficiency and Productivity through the elimination of waste (of time, knowledge, resources).

Once again there is an element of Newspeak here as it is clear that the 'convergence' of general and vocational education is to be understood as the increased subordination of general education to the production of 'work-related' skills; that the emphasis on performance is a mechanism for the decoupling of 'skills' from the broader knowledge base which appropriately contextualises the effects of particular performances; that the elimination of 'waste' knowledge, time and resources is a value laden process rather than simply a technical one.[3]

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[1] See Bates (1989) for a discussion of Leadership and the rationalisation of society.

[2] Ironically, as Mintzberg, that doyen of management theorists, points out, as competing organisations (and societies) strive to enlarge their control over more and more areas of economic and social action through mergers, takeovers and vertical integration, the result is collectively an increase in uncertainty for other organisations and societies.

[3] Moreover, as Mintzberg(1989) also notes, the quest for efficiency 'often drives the organisation towards an economic morality which can amount to a social immorality' (p333)

But even if the objectives are taken at face value it is proper to ask if they are indeed appropriate in our current circumstances. What is clear is that they are based upon a conception of productive activity which is essentially driven by traditional practices within the manufacturing sector. Carmichael is imbued with the manufacturing mentality. And he is right about many of the changes that need to be made in that sector. But as a model for a more general 'vocational' education Finn, Carmichael, Mayer and Deveson are be barking up the wrong tree for there is a general decline in the opportunity for such work. The decline of paid work in agriculture (from 70% of the population at the turn of the century to 4% today), the massive decline in manufacturing industry and the casualisation of labour within the growth of the service sector as well as the oversupply of professional labour are examples which should should give us pause for thought about the anachronistic prescription which is being offered. Under the banner of 'one-step-forwards' it will in fact give us two steps back.

Moreover, despite attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable through a new rhetoric of 'convergence' the specific nature of vocational education is in considerable conflict with the broader 'generic' knowledge base required as a background to flexibility in work and careers which we are told will characterise the future unstable and chaotic world of work.

But, if we are to have the language and practices of the cult of competency thrust upon us, what are the likely effects? In educational professions there will be marked changes in the four message systems through which schools and higher educational institutions are constructed. In particular:

> *Pedagogy*. Here we will see a redefinition of student and professional as worker rather than citizen; a worker who is managed through classification systems and controlled through peer group pressure via 'self managing' work groups. For teachers, as in the other professions we will see the proletarianisation of teaching which will be reduced via the competency machine to technique rather than the exercise of professional imagination, reducing the dynamic of the field to technical, methodological and managerial functions.
>
> *Curriculum*. Here we will see the reduction of curriculum from the excitement of increasing participation in the argument over what is to count as knowledge in particular

fields and the relation of that knowledge to the wider social order to a pre-specified selection of knowledge and method around which barriers will be set and about which little negotiation is possible. The stockade mentality of the current attempts to define the national curriculum is a perfect example.

Assessment: This is likely to be determined not in the terms of the complex and inherently unpredictable outcomes of an open pedagogy and curriculum, but in terms of closed, easily measurable outcomes of a functional, technical kind, despite all the claims of 'measurement breakthroughs'.

Social Discipline: Each of the above changes is set within a context devoted to producing a new form of social control of both students and professions, one in which the professions become incorporated into a new managerial system of standardisation, hierachisation, globalisation and invasion of the life-world through the extension of surveillance mechanisms linked to economic models focused on production and efficiency.

The overall result of the cult of competency, paradoxically, is likely to be a system that may well serve to restrict the development of expert professionalism, that real competence which is what is most needed to drive the development of the professions forward. In constraining the open-ended nature of professional activity at this expert end of the scale we may well produce a competency based system in which substantially more professionals' performance will be reduced to the level of basic skills.We may well end up with the very thing we do not want: professionals in education as elsewhere who are indeed barely competent.

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